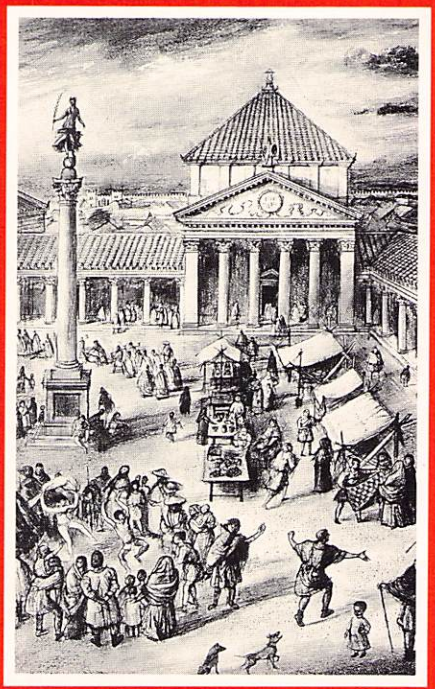
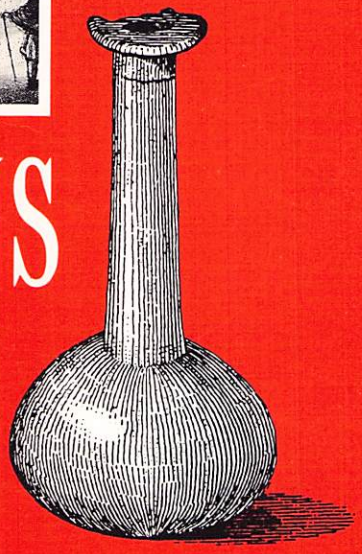
VERULAMIUM

A FIND! GIRL STUDENTS UNEARTHING A PERFECT EXAMPLE OF ROMAN POTTERY THAT HAS BEEN BURIED FOR OVER 1,700 YEARS



SINCE THE ROMANS



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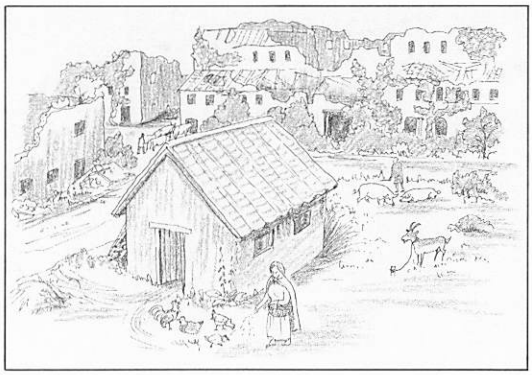
VERULAMIUM
SINCE THE ROMANS

Verulamium flourished for over four hundred years from about AD.49 and was the third city of Roman Britain. Although abandoned in the fifth century and eventually replaced by the new town of St. Albans around the abbey, the existence and site of Verulamium was never forgotten. For sixteen centuries the remains of streets, houses, the cathedral-like basilica, temples, shops and the theatre remained buried. The site of Verulamium was known in that it regularly served as a quarry for building materials, in the 11th century for the Roman brick and tile to build the abbey's proud Norman tower and later in the 18th and 19th centuries for material to repair the rutted roads of the time.

From the sixteenth century, the predecessors of today's archaeologists first began to take an interest in recording evidence of the Roman city. Scientific excavation of the site was pioneered by the Wheelers in the 1930s and has continued almost continuously ever since, although recent work has been predominantly concerned with the rescue of evidence from new building and development.

This short book records a small but significant slice of the social history of archaeology. It traces the development of our appreciation for the past from a search for building materials to the scientific research of a valued cultural resource. The endeavours of the past fifty years have only scratched the surface, with some 90% of the area of the city remaining unexcavated. Who knows what remains to be discovered beneath the grassy expanses of Verulamium Park and what techniques may be available to the archaeologists of the future ?

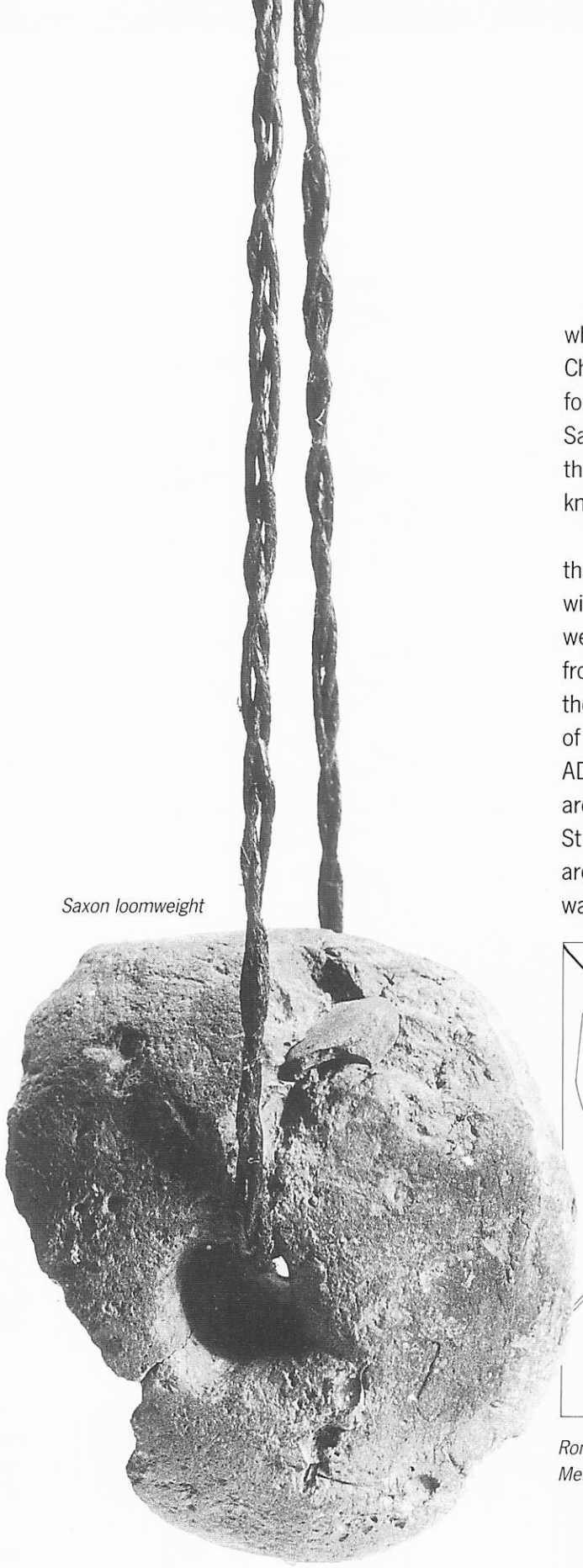
The End of Verulamium



Artists impression of ruined basilica with 5th century building in foreground

The end of Roman Britain is traditionally dated to AD.410 when the Emperor Honorius instructed the Britons to look to their own defence. The city of Verulamium survived for at least a generation after this date. In AD.429 the shrine of St.Alban was visited by Germanus, Bishop of Auxerre who wrote of a flourishing civic life. Professor Frere's excavations between the Theatre and the Basilica in the 1950s revealed new building work extending well into the fifth century. This sequence ended with the laying of a water pipe, perhaps as late as AD.440, showing that the city's water supply and probably other civic functions were still being maintained. Elsewhere within the city (at the rear of the museum) a building was occupied at a time when pottery had ceased to be used in the fifth century, while in St.Michael's Street a very late timber building was constructed in what for most of the Roman period had been an open space or square. This building contained a sherd from an amphora imported from the Eastern Mediterranean in the late fourth or fifth centuries.

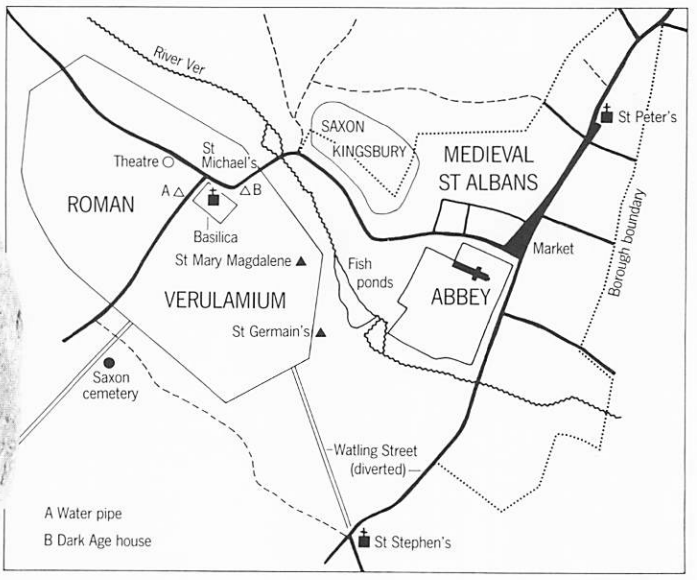
As the province became increasingly dominated by Saxon immigrants in the fifth and sixth centuries, Verulamium and the area around seems to have survived as a Christian British enclave within a countryside increasingly dominated and ruled by these people. By the end of the sixth or beginning of the seventh century a small Saxon cemetery was in use outside the Silchester gate of the city and it was perhaps around this period that the place became known as Watlingchester, the Roman town of the Waeclingas. Watling Street was the name originally given to the old Roman Road between London and Verulamium because it led to the 'chester' of the Waeclingas. The martyrdom of St. Alban in the third century AD. and his burial in a cemetery on the hilltop



Saxon loomweight

where the great Abbey and Cathedral Church now stands provided a focus for the later development of a major Saxon and Medieval Abbey and the new settlement which became known as St.Albans

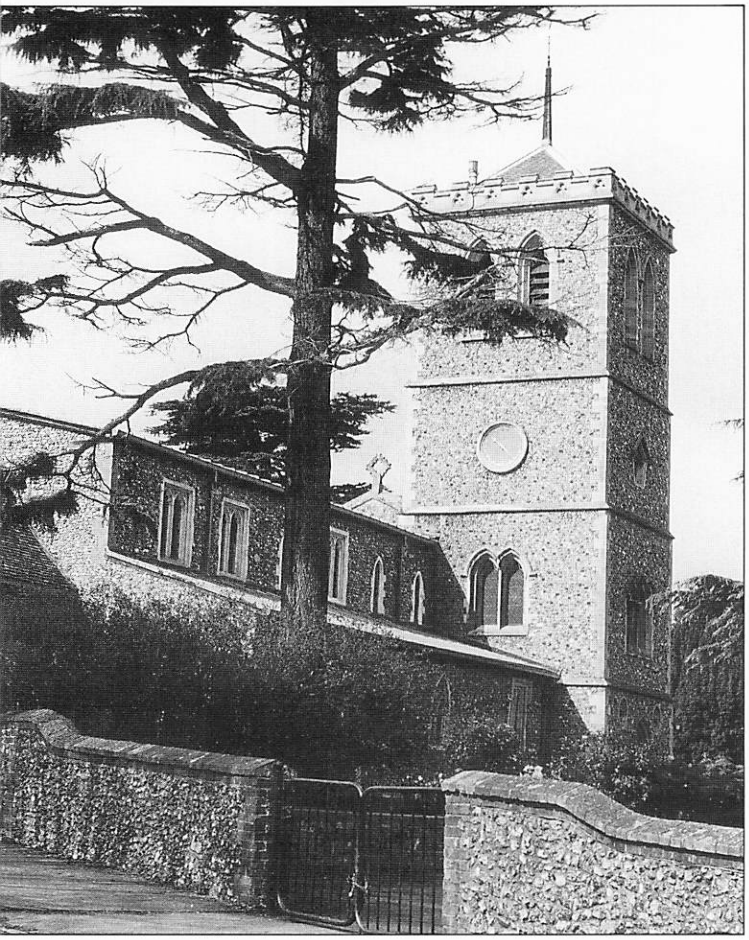
There is perhaps a possibility that some occupation continued within the Roman town. Two loom-weights of Saxon type have come from the Forum, along with coins of the ninth century. After the building of St. Michaels Church in about AD.950-1000, a small village grew up around it and today St. Michaels Street, Church, School and Vicarage are the only built up area within the walls of Verulamium.



Roman Verulamium and Medieval St Albans

A Place of Robbers, Body Snatchers, Evil Women and Building Materials.

Despite the great upheaval which occurred with the end of Romanised life and the coming of the Dark Ages, the name Verulamium was never lost. The Northumbrian monk Bede, writing in the eighth century called it Verulamchester and William Camden in the sixteenth century recorded that it was still commonly called Verulam. By Camdens time the site was nothing more than green fields but the 'disappearance' of the Roman town was not simply the result of the natural processes of weathering and decay. Much was deliberately demolished by systematic digging for building materials.



St Michael's Church

Today, the site of the great Roman Basilica is occupied by St.Michaels Church. Traditionally this was built in the year 948 by Abbot Ulsinus and although this date can be questioned, what is clear is that the church was built in late Saxon times, and that by this time the massive Roman building which preceded it had been raised to the ground. Much was demolished for building materials but such wholesale demolition might well have resulted from a desire of the Abbey to destroy idolatrous remains. Abbot Eadmar (about 960) *searched through the depths of the earth where the vestiges of the city of Verulamium appeared, and found ancient stone walls with tiles and columns, reserving what were*

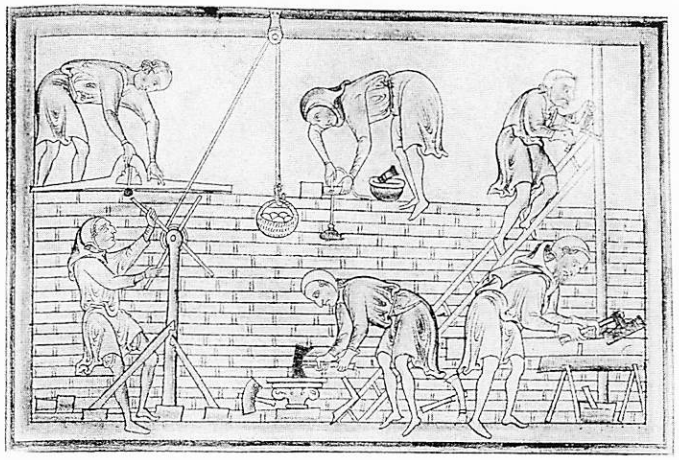
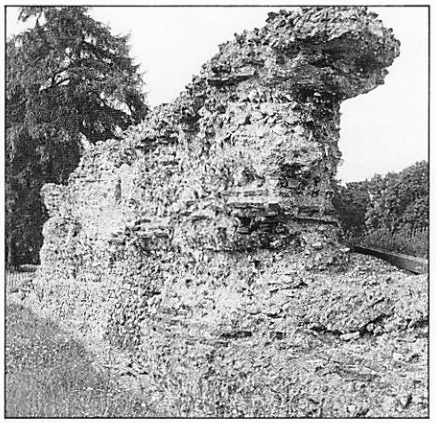


Illustration of building St Albans Church from Matthew Paris' "Life of St Alban"

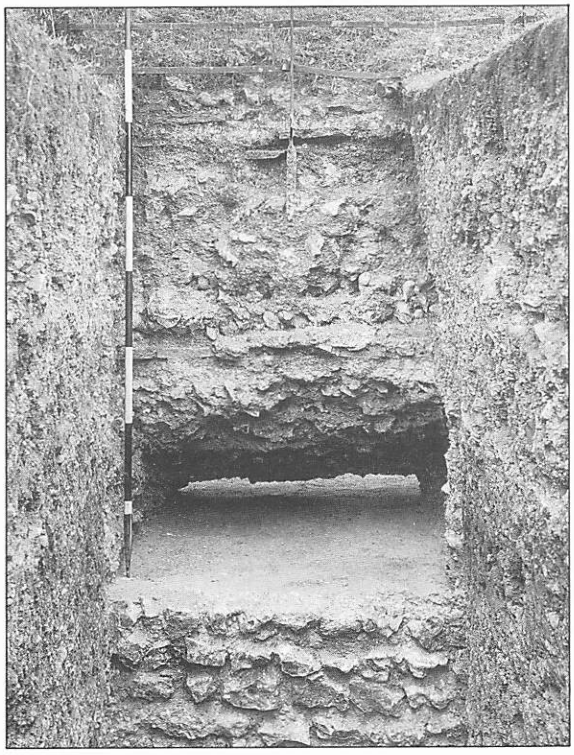
necessary for the building of the church which he proposed to raise..... the diggers discovered in the foundations of ancient buildings and underground hollows, jugs and amphorae of well made pottery turned on the wheel, and glass vases containing the dust of the dead..... and half destroyed temples were brought to light, overturned altars and many kinds of coins which they used as idols and which the ancient idolatrous citizens of Verulamium worshipped. All which things were broken to pieces by order of the Abbot.



St Germain's Block in Verulamium Park

St. Michaels was not the only 'church' erected in late Saxon times; two chapels were also built. Within the walls was St.Mary Magdalene and just outside was St.Germains, its name still surviving in St.Germain's Block, the standing section of the city wall overlooking the lake.

Much of Verulamium was however quarried for building materials. Eadmar's predecessor Abbot Ealdred (about 940), *searched through the ancient subterranean crypts of the ancient city called Werlemcestre, overturned everything and filled everything up. He even destroyed, filled up or blocked up tracks and passages running beneath the ground.....for they were the hiding places of robbers, body snatchers and evil women. Nay so far as he could he actually obliterated the ditches of the city and certain caves to which*



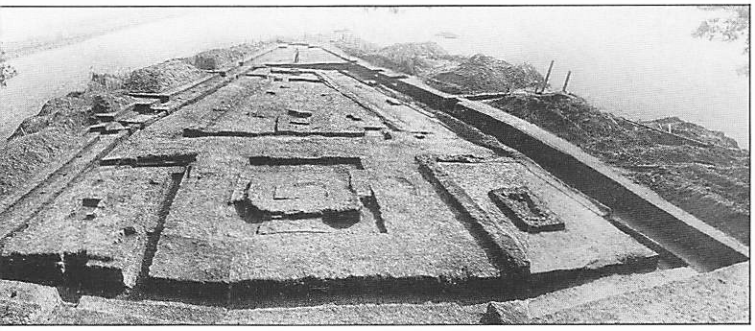
City wall showing robbed out tile course

malefactors and fugitives from the dense woods in the vicinity resorted to as refuges. Moreover setting aside the complete tiles and stones which he found for building purposes, he reserved them for the fabric of his church, for he intended if opportunity offered to pull down the old church and build a new one.

The 'robbing' of building materials from Verulamium continued until the nineteenth century when some of the streets were dug up for road metal. This itself was an old practice; the antiquary John Leland recorded that *That noble street which is commonly called Watelynstrete was discovered in the year 1531 within the ancient city of Verulamium, when sand was being sought for repairing the public roads.*

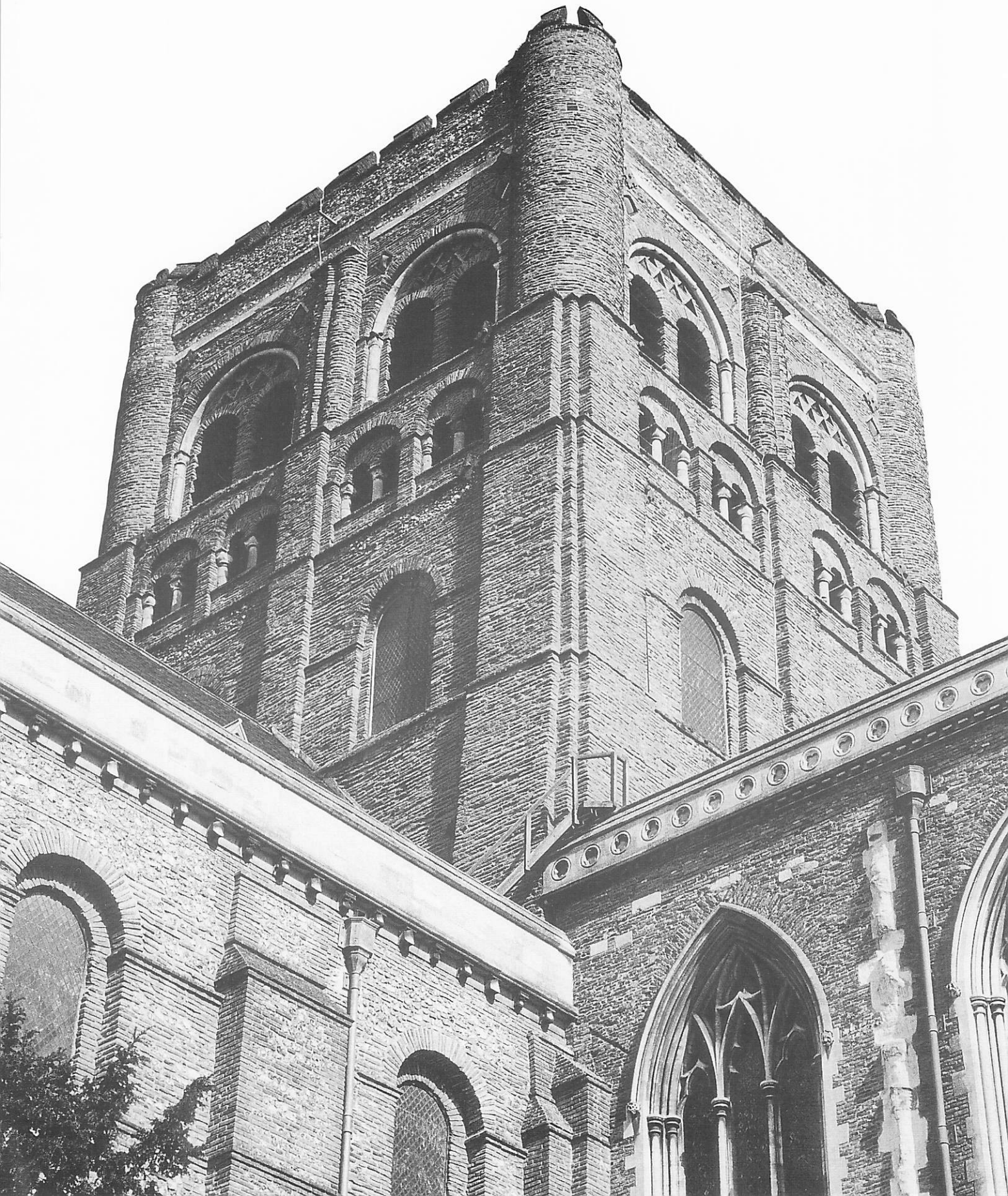
Today the great Norman tower of the Abbey Church, built of thousands of Roman tiles and bricks, stands as a living testimony to the activities of the early 'stone robbers'. The robbing of Roman structures was often very thorough but those who did it new their trade well and carried it out in an economical manner. Usually the trenches dug to remove wall footings were no wider than the wall being removed and whose line they followed.

Eventually the site was turned over to agricultural use. It is possible on a winter's afternoon when the sun is low to make out the pattern of 'ridge and furrow', the result of medieval ploughing, over a large area of Verulamium Park.



Excavation of the Triangular Temple showing robber trenches where walls once stood

The Norman tower of St Albans Abbey, built using thousands of Roman tiles and bricks



Early Antiquaries and Excavations

The spirit of enquiry prevalent in the Tudor period led the self styled 'Kings Antiquary' John Leland to Verulamium and although his Itinerary remained unpublished until the eighteenth century his work was generally of great influence. As well as recording the robbing of Watling Street he also recorded 'near the Watlyngstrete in the ruins of Verulamium I found the pipes (as I imagine) of an aqueduct, made of baked tiles, but rounded, of which each was inserted into the end of the other.....I also saw a place now encumbered with fruit trees where, it is with all probability conjectured, was the palatium of Verulamium.'

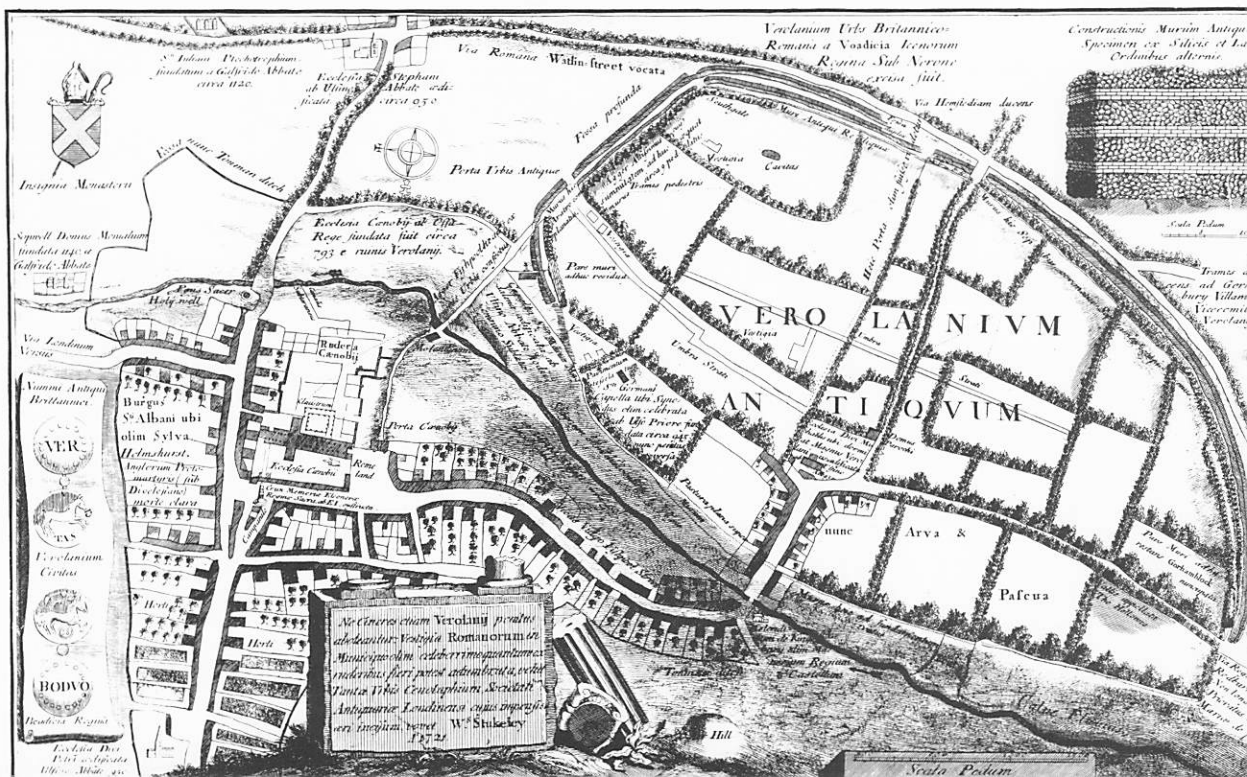
William Camden the greatest of Tudor Antiquaries, also visited the site. He recorded that... nothing of it now remains but ruins of walls, checquer'd pavements, and Roman Coins now and then digg'd up

If I ſhould lay any great ſtreſs on the Stories common amongſt the people, and ſhould upon that bottom tell you what great ſtore of Roman Coins, how many images of gold and ſilver, how many veſſels, how many marble pillars, how many capitals, in fine, how many wonderful pieces of ancient work have been here fetch'd out of the earth; I could not in reaſon expect to be credited.

From Camden's Britannia, 1695

The tradition inaugurated by Leland and Camden continued into the eighteenth century. In 1721 the Society of Antiquaries of London published a map of Verulamium drawn by William Stukeley. His travels through Britain between 1718-25 laid the foundations of modern Field Archaeology. At Veru-

Stukeley's map 1721



REMAINS OF THE ROMAN THEATRE AT VERULAM.

Sketch by F W Fairholt of the theatre during excavations in 1847

lamium he recorded the destruction of the remains of the city wall for road metal, a tessellated pavement, noting that *there are one or two entire underground* and the presence of *foundations of houses and streets, gutters floors etc under the hedgerows* on Bluehouse Hill where in March 1718-19 a mosaic pavement had been found.

Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries chance finds and discoveries were made at Verulamium but it was not until 1847 that the first archaeological excavation took place. In that year R. Grove Lowe excavated the Theatre and published, for his time, an excellent plan and description. Less satisfactory excavations took place on the occasion of the Archaeological Association's visit to St. Albans in 1869.

Between 1898-1902 William Page and the vicar of St. Michaels, the Rev Bicknall excavated on the site of the Forum and their work still remains crucial for our understanding of that building. Earlier (1894) Page had dug for the remains of the Silchester Gate and shown that its remains lay further to the west than had been supposed. Bicknall carried out further excavations around the vicarage in 1911 and 1914. Despite this sensible work much fanciful speculation still prevailed but by the 1920s large scale excavations at Silchester, Wroxeter, and Caerwent had shown what could be achieved.

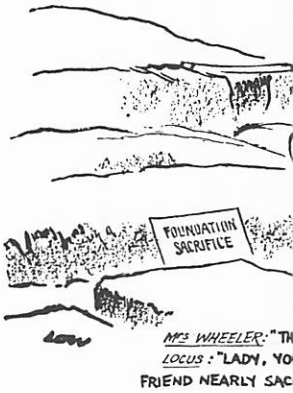
Reverend Bicknall's excavations 1911 or 1914

Illustrations of remains discovered in St Stephens churchyard 1848

The Wheeler Years

Sir Mortimer and Tessa Wheeler

In 1929 the corporation of St. Albans acquired a large part of the site of the Roman city, on very favourable terms, from the Earl of Verulam, with the intention of laying it out as a public park. The Society of Antiquaries of London was approached by the corporation with a view to excavating the buried remains and it was eventually agreed that Mortimer Wheeler, then Keeper of the London Museum, should be invited to undertake the task. This he did under the auspices of the Verulamium Excavation Committee. Appeals for funds were made to various quarters and grants were received from the Society of Antiquaries of London, the Haverfield Bequest Committee and the Craven and Ireland Funds of the University of Oxford.



These funds were greatly boosted by public donations. In the light of today's thinking it is interesting to note the slant taken by the original appeals – *It is realised that the period is one of exceptional financial stress, but it may be emphasised incidentally that no less than 85 percent of all the money sub-*

VERULAMIUM.

EXCAVATIONS COMMENCED.

SEVERAL INTERESTING DISCOVERIES ALREADY MADE.

A TESSELATED PAVING, COINS AND POTTERY.

CITY COUNCIL'S PROPOSALS FOR BOATING LAKE AND PADDLING POOL.

On Monday morning, on the site of the ancient City of Verulamium, the work of systematic scientific excavation was begun, and what at 8 a.m. on that morning appeared to be a simple operation may, quite possibly, be transformed into an epoch-making event.

On that morning, seventeen or eighteen workmen, with wheelbarrows, picks, spades, planks of wood, etc., gathered on [illegible] were divided into three parties. [illegible] a trench in the middle [illegible] which had been

Work at the entrance to from the Causeway has with the idea of working sumed site of the South gat so that its plan and l obtained.

In the woods at the Sout commenced to make a cut bank which revetted the that lay outside so as to c

When those engaged i gathered on Monday morn by the City Surveyor (Mr. had helped Dr. Wheeler c preliminary arrangements.

The workmen employed mostly ex-Service men.

A VERY PR BEGINNI

TRACES OF DOMESTIC

THE WEEK'S "F

The main discovery of the a portion of the tesselated pa

Sir Mortimer and Tessa Wheeler sorting finds

scribed is expended upon labour and contributes directly therefore to the relief of unemployment.

Assisted by his wife Tessa, a number of trained assistants and a workforce of unemployed labourers, Wheeler began work in July 1930 by clearing and exposing a section of the city wall and the site of the south or London Gate, where the foundations were reconstructed for public display. This was the beginning of four seasons with digging normally taking place for about three months each summer.

AT THE DIGGERS' TEA.

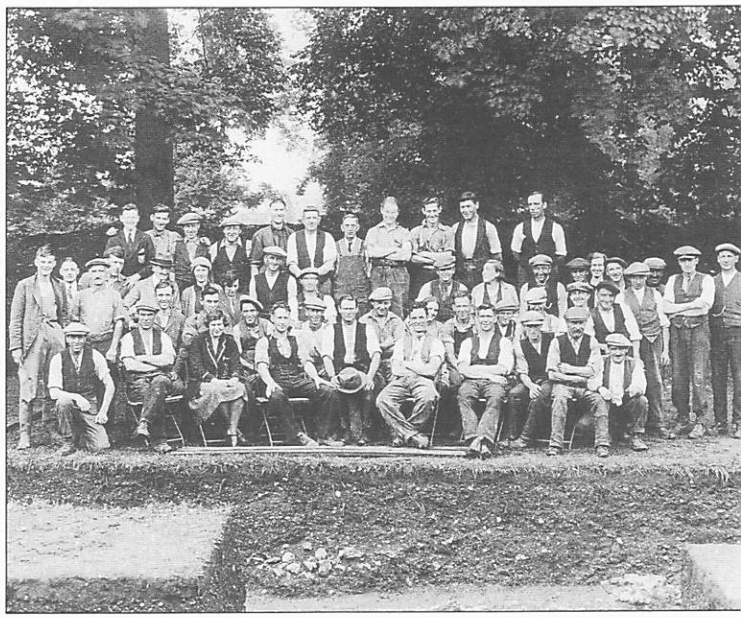
"In those trenches the authorised diggers—mostly young university men and women—were scrabbling and scratching and sifting with their hands or little trowels, looking for small objects such as utensils or trinkets or bits of mosaic.

"Presently they unstuck their muddy hands, and we, as guests, were allowed to join the diggers' tea. They have a canteen in a shack with an earth floor, and we sat on packing-cases at a trestle-table, and drank from quart mugs, and made a stab at a pound of butter as it passed along in its paper, and another stab with the same knife into the colossal honey-jar.

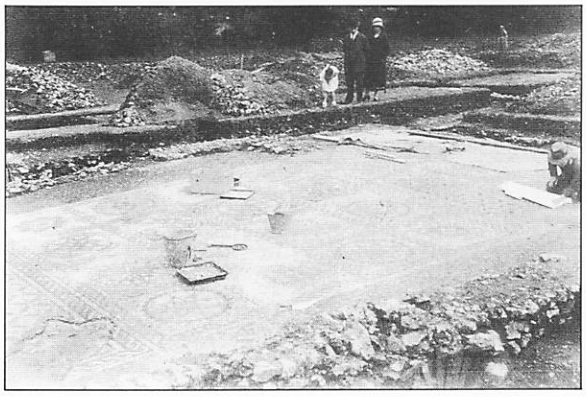
"Mugs ran short, and hot water was at a premium, and everyone who came in was wetter than the last, and clothes steamed and everything was jolly."

S IS THE STONE OF SACRIFICE."
RE TELLING ME! DID NOT MY
RIFICE HIS TOE ON THE BLASTED THING?"

VIERULAMIUM EXCAVATION COMMITTEE FOLLOWING UP A HOT TRAIL AFTER THEIR RECENT SENSATIONAL FIND OF CÆSAR'S FALSE TEETH. AMONG THOSE PRESENT WILL BE RECOGNISED MANY DISTINGUISHED FIGURES.



Wheeler's excavation team

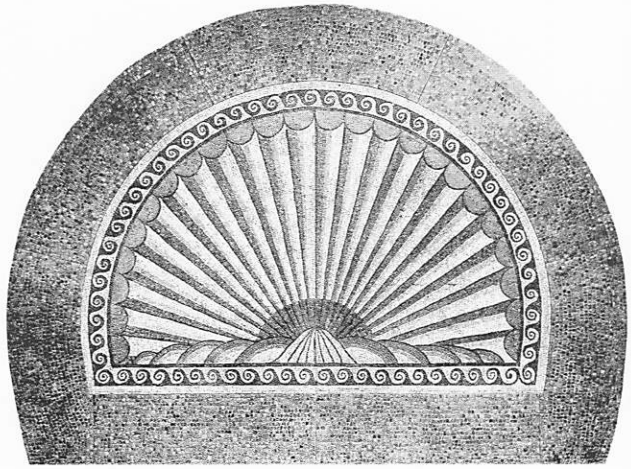


Tessa Wheeler, 1932, sweeping the hypocaust mosaic in preparation for Norman Davey to measure and record details of the floor

Work was not confined to the Roman city; excavation was also carried out on and behind the Devils Dyke at Wheathampstead and Prae Wood on sites of the Late Pre-Roman Iron Age. This led to the conclusion that Wheathampstead was the 'oppidum' where Julius Caesar defeated Cassivellaunus in 54 BC. and that the settlement in Prae wood replaced this in the time of Tasciovanus.

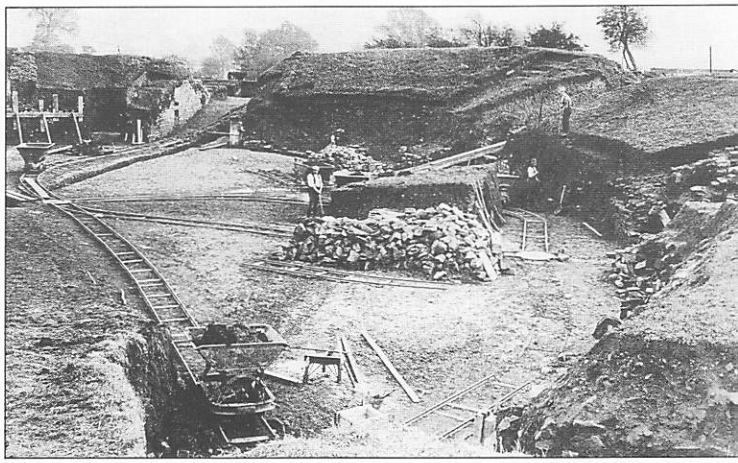
Within the Roman city a large area was excavated in its southern part which included a range of wealthy town houses. In their heyday these were of considerable proportions, their interiors decorated with finely painted walls and floored with spectacular mosaics. It was Tessa herself who took charge of lifting and recording the mosaics and ensuring their safe removal for display at a later date.

The work of the Wheelers provided for the first time an account of the development of Verulamium and its pre-Roman antecedents which was published in 1936. Inevitably their ideas and conclusions have been modified and altered by the results of subsequent work. Their work at Verulamium had considerable influence, not least in the encouragement of public interest in archaeology through national press and newsreel coverage of the excavations.



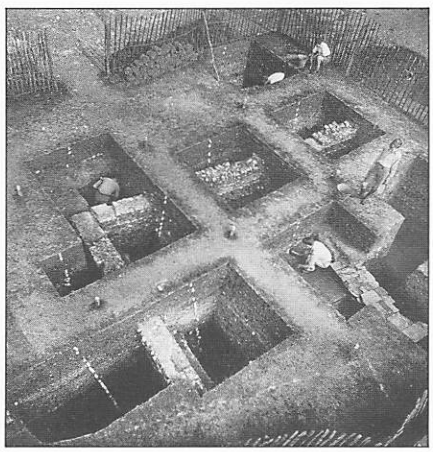
The Shell mosaic

The Wheelers' work was carried on by their associates. Large scale excavations of the theatre were undertaken by Miss K.M.Kenyon in 1934. This was paid for by the Earl of Verulam on whose land it lies. The remains were consolidated and opened for display and are still maintained by the Gorhambury Estate. A temple situated adjacent to the theatre was excavated by Mr.A.G. Lowther in 1935 and also the proposed museum site where the corner of the basilica was revealed and reconstructed for display. Three years later the macellum or Market Hall was dug by Miss K.M. Richardson. Wheeler himself returned in 1949 and jointly with Mrs.M.Cotton directed a training excavation which uncovered one of the temples at the rear of the Forum.



Excavation of theatre, 1934. The trucks were used to remove the spoil

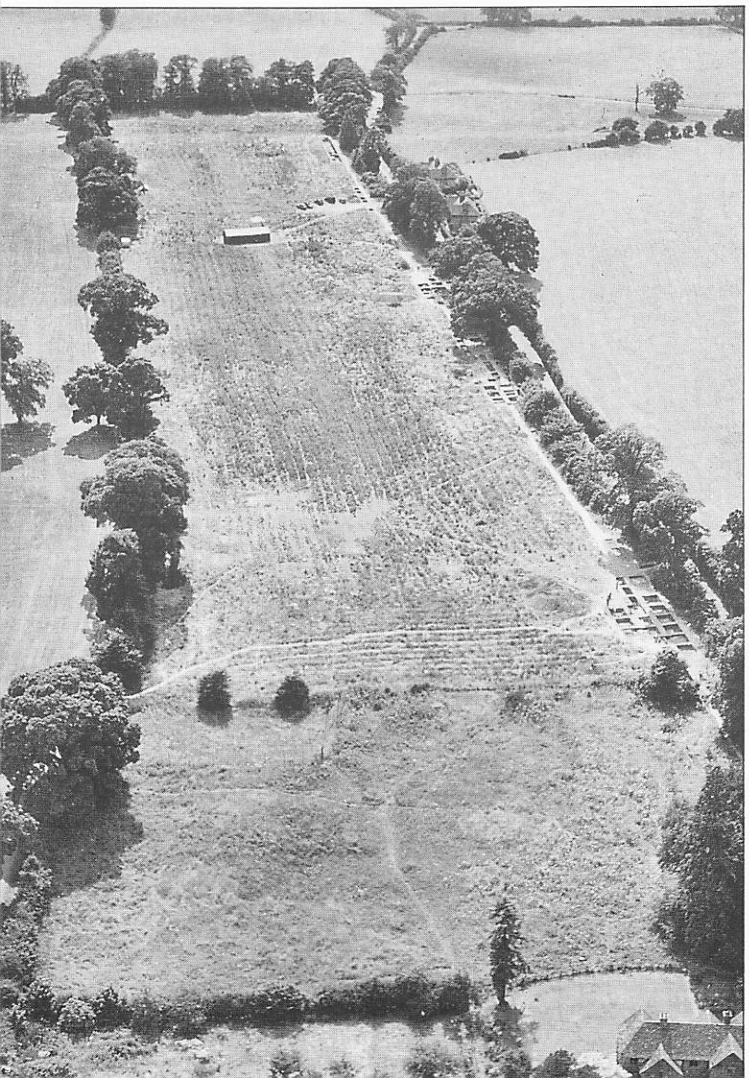
Mr A G Lowther reconstructing the lamp chimney

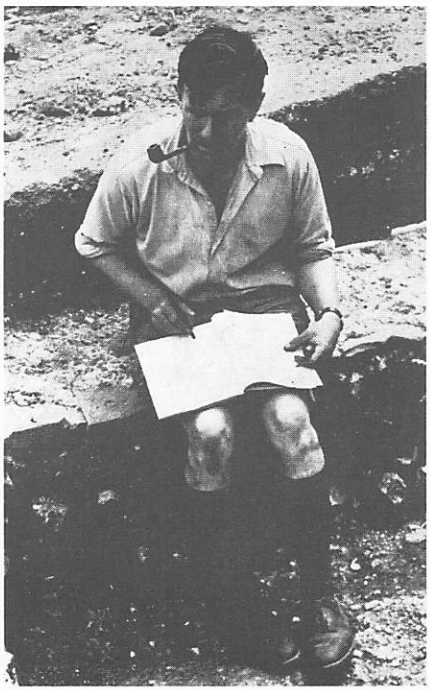


Grid system of trenches excavated by Sir Mortimer Wheeler and Mrs Cotton, 1949 revealing part of the Forum

The Post War Era

Excavations on defence sites during the war and in the bombed remains of such places as London and Canterbury prior to redevelopment led to the development of 'Rescue Archaeology' and the provision of central government grants (through the Ministry of Works). In 1954 it became known that it was planned to improve the St.Albans to Hemel Hempstead road by widening Bluehouse Hill and extending it northwards to the west of St. Michaels Street. This offered, in effect a complete cross-section of the Roman City, thirty yards wide. Excavation was organised by the Society of Antiquaries and the re-constituted Verulamium Excavation Committee and directed by Prof. S.S. Frere for seven seasons from 1955-1961. Financial support came from the Ministry of Works, The British Academy, the Haverfield Trustees and the Society of Antiquaries and from public donations and receipts from sales made on site.





Prof. Sheppard Frere

Aerial view of Prof. Frere's Bluehouse Hill excavations

Dolphin mosaic during excavation, 1958

Not all of Frere's work was confined to the strip disturbed by the new road. Excavation extended beyond this, notably in Insula XIV, next to the Theatre, where a series of shops was discovered. The statuette of Venus was found here in a box of scrap metal destined for the melting pot.

Frere's results provided a firm framework for establishing a chronological sequence across the site and uncovered traces of two major fires, one associated with the Boudiccan rebellion of A.D.60 and the other dating to around A.D.155. Also from his excavations came fine examples of wall paintings which through the painstaking work of Dr.Norman Davey were carefully restored for display in the Museum (and the British Museum). The museum collections were also enhanced by additional mosaics of which the finest was the 'lion pavement' showing a lion carrying a stag.

Chance discovery continued to play an important role with the finding of fragments of an inscription during the levelling of St. Michaels School playground. These pieces of Purbeck stone came originally from over one of the entrances to the Basilica, the administrative centre of the Roman city, and recorded the dedication of the building during the governorship of Agricola under the emperor Vespasian.

Dr Norman Davey and Miss Cecil Western lifting fallen wall plaster, 1955

Although most of Verulamium is a scheduled Ancient Monument rescue work began to play an important role in recovering its past. John Lunn, while Museum Director excavated in the Museum car park and Alan McWhirr did some work prior to its extension in 1963. In 1966-68 Dr Ian Stead excavated a large pre-Roman cremation cemetery and Roman ribbon development along the Silchester Road to the south of the Roman City for the Verulamium Excavation Committee, the work being financed by the Ministry of Public Buildings and Works. Dr. Ilid Anthony also excavated while Museums Director, in St. Michaels and prior to the construction of the running track at Westminster Lodge.

In 1973 the Museum appointed a Keeper of Field Archaeology for the first time and rescue work produced a substantial *extra-mural* bath-house (1974) an early bath-building within the city (1975) and various other information. More recently a great deal of time has been spent on the large cremation cemetery at St.Stephens which lay just outside the walls of the city. This has been concluded in 1989 with the discovery of a fine lead coffin, perhaps the single most outstanding find since the Venus figurine in 1959. In 1986 a programme of research excavations run jointly by the Museum and University College Cardiff was commenced. In its first three years this has produced important information particularly about the size of the earliest Roman Verulamium, the Antonine Fire and by chance located what is almost certainly the Public Baths.

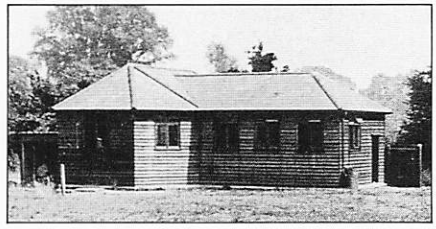
THE TIMES SATURDAY MARCH 4 1989

Coffin excites archaeologists

MICK YOUNG

Mrs Rosalind Niblett, keeper of archaeology at the Verulamium Museum, yesterday with a coffin she described as the most exciting find at St Albans, Hertfordshire, for 30 years. It dates from the third century AD and is made of solid lead, weighing about 800lb, and lavishly decorated. The grave was found at the highest point of a large Roman cemetery, indicating the high status of the occupant, Mrs Niblett said. Yesterday the unopened coffin was taken away for examination.

The Verulamium Museum



Temporary museum c.1933

It was the pioneering work of the Wheelers in the 1930s, not least by the encouragement of public interest in archaeology and the need for a permanent home for the finds from their excavations, which prompted proposals for a new museum in St. Albans. During the work a small wooden building on site was used as a temporary museum and was very popular with the local residents. The building was still open at the end of the excavations in 1934 and it was then that Tessa Wheeler appealed for the construction of a larger museum, more suitable for storing and displaying the numerous finds.

The Editor,
The Herts Advertiser,
Dagnall Street,
St. Albans.

Sir,

As one of those who live in or near St. Albans and have watched with interest the progress of the Verulamium excavations since 1930, I venture to appeal in your columns for further information as to the progress of the Museum scheme which is the inevitable sequel to those excavations. The matter is one of considerably more than local interest, since the excavations in question have attracted widespread attention and have given Verulamium, I think, a new importance in the eyes of the outside world.

Both in St. Albans and far beyond its limits, one continually meets the enquiry "What has happened to the objects found in Verulamium during the progress of the five years' work there?" Some of these enquirers have actually seen pottery, bronzes, coins, etc., in the process of recovery from the soil, whilst others are aware that on a Roman site of the exceptional importance of Verulamium objects of intrinsic interest must have been found in very considerable quantities. Nevertheless at the present time, apart from a few remarkable mosaic pavements, nothing can be seen of all these discoveries either in St. Albans or anywhere else. The collection presumably belongs to the Corporation, which is the owner of the land upon which most of the excavations took place. What is the Corporation going to do with its great collection? How, and, above all, when, is it going to render this collection accessible both to the people of St. Albans and to the numerous visitors who flock to the city throughout the year.

The idea proved popular and although there was some thought of enlarging the Herts.County Museum, in Hatfield Rd., this was not considered a desirable solution. After Tessa's tragically early death in 1936 a petition was sent to the council asking that her work be commemorated in a way that she herself would have wished by the construction of an on site museum. The council eventually agreed and funded the £8,748 necessary for the work. The site eventually chosen was that of St.Germains farmhouse, from which the fields and meadows of what is now the Park had long been worked. The house and buildings were demolished, with the exception of one barn which still survives, and a purpose built museum erected.

The Earl of Harewood opening Verulamium Museum, 8th May 1939

By the middle of 1938 the building was complete and in January of the following year was opened to the public. The local press hailed it as *an asset of the greatest value to the citizens of St. Albans*...The museum and its collections would also testify to *the important part the Roman city of Verulamium played in the development of civilisation immediately before and during the early centuries of the Christian era.* The building was officially opened on May 8th 1939 by the Earl of Harewood who unlocked the door with a ceremonial gilt key and unveiled a memorial plaque dedicating the museum to Tessa Wheeler.

The Mayor addresses the guests at the Museum's opening ceremony

Interior of the Museum, 1939

Since 1939, the main gallery has seemingly undergone few changes. The general layout is much the same and the original Nigerian walnut cases still in place, although displays have changed and temporary exhibitions come and gone. The Museum and the Roman city itself survived the war years despite a stray stick of bombs which fell in the park. The mosaic in the 'Hypocaust' building was given permanent protection from the elements in 1949-50 and this has recently been upgraded and enhanced (1989).

In 1962 the museum was extended with the assistance of the Carnegie United Kingdom Trust and this provided space for the finds from Frere's excavations, notably the wall plasters to be displayed. Also provided were a much need store, lecture room and conservation laboratory.

TREASURES OF VERULAMIUM

NEW MUSEUM AT ST. ALBANS

BELGIC AND ROMAN FINDS

The new Verulamium Museum, built by the Corporation of St. Albans at a cost of about £8,000 to house the finds made since 1930 in the Pre-Roman Belgic city at Prae Wood and in the successive Roman cities of Verulamium, is to be opened on Monday by the Earl of Harewood. The ...ations which brought to light the

However, the museum has not only undergone a physical extension. Since the days of Philip Corder and Audrey Williams, the first and second Directors, who practically ran the museum single-handed, the expertise and services demanded of a museum have broadened considerably. From 1957, Verulamium and the former County Museum, subsequently City Museum, were administered as a joint service. In 1955 John Lunn the third Director set up the schools loan service and during the time of Dr. Ilid Anthony the education service received financial support from the County Council and the permanent post of Education Officer was created. From 1965 all Hertfordshire schools have benefited from free admission and the opportunity to borrow many different items from the collection. The provision of a laboratory was followed by the creation of a conservation post and now a Keeper and Deputy Keeper of Conservation not only care for the museums own collection but also carry out agency work for museums over a wide area. During his time as Director, Gareth Davies extended the curatorial staff and in 1973 created a Field Archaeology section to carry out both excavations and watching briefs on sites of potential interest. The establishment of a permanent base in the museum resource centre at Kyngston House in 1984 was an invaluable improvement in the facilities at the Museum's disposal for excavation and storage.

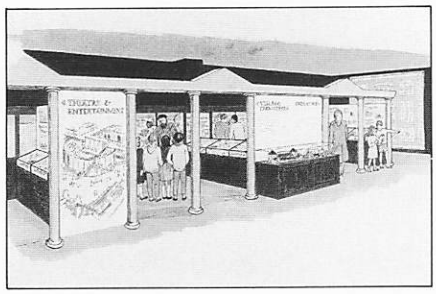
School children watching the lion mosaic being installed in the Museum, 1963

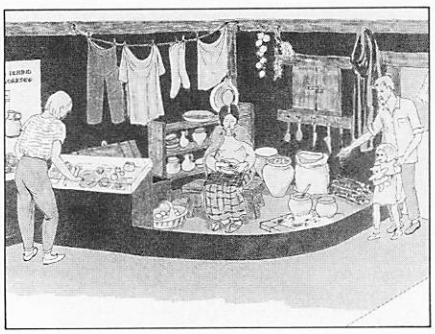
Reconstructing a pot in the conservation laboratory

Verulamium in the Future

Today practically all of the area within the city wall of Verulamium is protected by the provisions of the Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Areas Act (1979). This means that the site is secure from development and although a large part of this area is regularly ploughed it is hoped that schemes at present under discussion will prevent further damage from agriculture. Beyond the walls the pressures of modern development show no signs of easing and rescue archaeology continues to press new information and material into our hands.

The arrival of a new Director, Sam Mullins, in 1987 and the creation of a design and display section presage a range of initiatives in the interpretation and presentation of the story of Verulamium. The Museum's side gallery will be redisplayed in 1990 and plans have been advanced for the redisplay of the main gallery and building of a new entrance onto the car park. Through this development of the museum's educational and interpretive potential, Verulamium will be made more accessible to an increasingly discerning and leisured public and ensure it remains a vital cultural resource for visitor and resident alike.





Artists impressions of new gallery displays

Verulamium saw the pioneering of excavation techniques and a greater public awareness of archaeology in the 1930s and it is intended to maintain those high standards of scholarship alongside a similar excellence in presentation and communication into the 1990s and beyond.

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